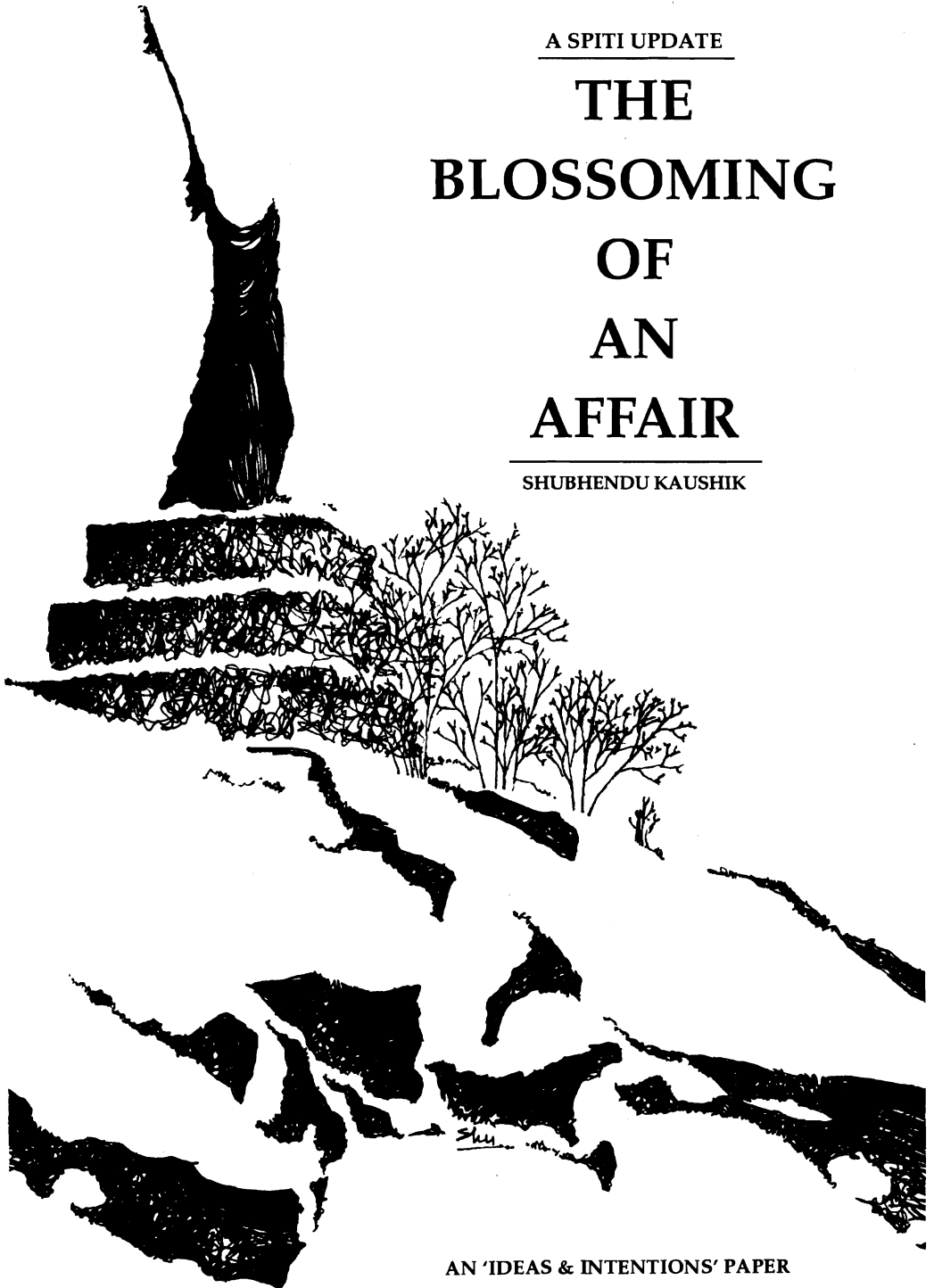


A SPITI UPDATE

THE BLOSSOMING OF AN AFFAIR

SHUBHENDU KAUSHIK



AN 'IDEAS & INTENTIONS' PAPER

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THE BLOSSOMING OF AN AFFAIR

SHUBHENDU KAUSHIK

This writeup is a brief account of my preoccupation with Spiti over the past eight months or so. I spent all of August and September and then one and a half months in January and February travelling in and around Spiti. I went places, met people, and absorbed Spiti through the pores of my sunburnt skin. To say that I enjoyed myself would be a gross understatement. My affair with Spiti seems to be blossoming.

CONTINUITY

What triggered off my involvement in Spiti was the fact that this beautiful valley in Himachal Pradesh had just been thrown open to tourism. Having seen the extent of damage, to ecosystems and to value systems, that has accompanied the spread of large-scale tourism in other Himalayan regions, I succumbed to the urge to spend some time in Spiti and see what I could do to minimise the damage there. I am now trying to get the administration and all sections of the people in Spiti to start thinking about the various implications of tourism in the valley and to work on an evolving strategy for 'sustainable tourism', 'eco-tourism', 'appropriate', 'alternative' or 'planned tourism', terms which I don't quite relate to, but which help anyway.

Before leaving for Spiti last summer, I put down my ideas and intentions in a paper entitled 'TOWARDS A TOURISM STRATEGY IN SPITI' (published by EQUATIONS in July 1993). Reading that introductory paper might help you to more easily digest some of the seemingly 'strange' things - most of them concerning the nature of my involvement - that I will be saying in this paper.

Tourism, as I just said, was what triggered off my involvement in Spiti. It provided me with a point of entry and the initial impetus. But it was obvious right from the beginning that to look at any one thing in isolation would be quite impossible.

Whatever I did in Spiti would be an indivisible expression of my 'being there', and would emerge quite naturally from it, almost as a by-product (or so I would like it to be at all times).

THESE ARE MY MOUNTAINS!

In the same way as lovers belong to each other, I belong to these mountains, and these mountains, in their turn, are mine. Anyone, outsider or local, who loves my mountains as much as I do, 'owns' these mountains as much as I do. Conversely, anyone who causes harm to my mountains doesn't really belong here, even though he or she might have been born and brought up here.

Anything that I might do to prevent the messing up of my mountains is therefore out of pure selfish interest. Selfish interest, and nothing else, is the motive force behind my actions.

AN INTERESTING SUMMER . . .

I reached Spiti in the beginning of August last year. To start with, I just travelled around, feeling good to be in the mountains once more, getting familiar with places, people and patterns in Spiti, and waiting for actions to emerge from within. My concerns occasionally crept into conversations with local people, officials and tourists. Some copies of my introductory paper got passed around, leading often to discussions and to enhanced awareness.

During these conversations and discussions, I found myself talking about tourism, about preserving the health of the environment, the culture and the values of the region, about sustainable, clean, contextual and meaningful development, and, partly because of my architectural background, about the need to preserve (and to improve upon) the richness and the ecological soundness that is the essence of the architecture of Spiti.

. . . AND THEN A MAD WINTER

The winter visit was quite an adventure. The one and a half months that I spent there were right in the middle of the cold wave that lashed Spiti this winter. The weather was fierce all through, and night temperatures were below -20°C most of the time, occasionally going down to -25°C and beyond.

Through good weather and bad I walked up and down the valley, visiting some of the remotest villages (like Lossar), and some of the highest (like Tashigang, which is around 15,300 ft). Even higher than that, I once came across snow-leopard pug-marks, of an adult and a cub, tracked them for a couple of kilometers, but missed seeing them. Ibex, blue sheep and marmots were also spotted on many occasions.

[A sudden sadness overcame me as I finished writing these last lines. The first reaction of many of those who read these lines would be, "Hey! Spiti sounds like such an exciting, unspoilt and 'authentic' experience. I've got to go there!" Am I, in effect, hastening the process that I set out to slow down? An hour of soul-searching later came a tentative answer to this question. No. The only meaningful and lasting solution to problems such as tourism lies in an endless process of maturing. Everything else is only stop-gap. And maturity can never be based on ignorance. The mass hunger for 'authentic' experiences and destinations will finally be satisfied only when we bring a certain authenticity into our own lives and our own surroundings. Travel won't stop then. Only mass-consumption will.]

Most of the rest of this paper consists of a disjointed, though roughly sequential account of some of the things that I got involved with in Spiti since the last summer.

THE SELLOUT

When I reached Spiti in the beginning of August, a tourism-related crisis of sorts was already on. In what was the first real season of tourism in the valley, an astonishingly large number of people were selling off their old belongings (many of them heirlooms and religious objects) to the tourists.

The tourists who bought these things were not all of them casual buyers; there were many among them who had come to Spiti loaded with money and with the sole purpose of buying whatever they could that was of antique value. One such tourist, a German zipping through the valley in a Gypsy on a large-scale buying spree, on being asked by another tourist why he indulged in such unethical, if not downright illegal buying, replied with cynical simplicity, "If I don't buy them off, someone else will."

This sellout was going on in all parts of the valley, either directly or through agents, and was fast taking on the scale of an epidemic.

Most of the direct sale took place in the 'hot-spots' of tourism where a large number of tourists usually landed up. Foremost among these were the five major gompas in Spiti - Tabo, Dankhar, Kungri, Tinguit and Ki, where it was often the lamas themselves who were actively involved. Old items of handicraft, which included shawls, carpets, traditional leather boots, jewellery and utensils - both of daily use and exquisitely crafted ceremonial ones - were displayed prominently at some of these gompas (Kungri, Tabo, Dankhar). At Ki, the sale took place a little less blatantly, with the lamas bringing out and showing things to tourists in the room where they were served tea. Luckily, none of the gompa property (to my knowledge) has been sold so far. This is not counting the major theft - precious stones estimated unofficially at around Rs. 70 lakhs - that took place in 1992 at a nunnery near Lari village. Besides, the intentions of some of the super-rich foreigners who are patronising and courting these gompas might well be dubious (this is certainly not an allegation).

Apart from the gompas, the direct sale also took place at other tourist spots like the villages of Lalung, Tabo, Kibber and Langza.

Lalung village is frequented mostly by tourists in jeep taxis, the major attraction being the extremely old and unique village-level gompa there which is said to be a contemporary of the gompa at Tabo. As soon as a jeep taxi or two landed up at Lalung, people would come hurrying out of their houses with things to sell. How they chose what to sell was quite simple - they would look around their house, and anything they found that was beautiful *and* old, they picked it up, put it in a fold in their clothing, and rushed out to greet the tourists.

At Tabo, the women would put on their best clothing and all their (inherited) finery* and then hang around near the gompa. Tourists going in or out would point out something that the women wore and ask, 'How much for this?' and this is how the sale took place.

* In Spiti, the eldest son inherits the land and the house, while the eldest daughter inherits the jewellery and other heirlooms.

In addition, scattered sales took place wherever in Spiti the tourists (hungry for anything with roots and context) managed to interact with the local people (hungry for money).

And then there are the agents and dealers who make their living out of buying and selling antiques, semi-antiques and pseudo-antiques. Most of them are from the neighbouring valleys like Kullu and Kinnaur, but some locals, too, are involved. Unlike the direct sale to tourists which started only last summer, these agents have been at it with the quiet efficiency of termites for almost a decade now.

In the beginning, they had a field day with the villagers, offering them colourful plastic tumblers in exchange for their traditional cups and bowls. Later, that is now, the villagers have begun to become at least half aware of the value of their belongings, so that now it is only half a rip-off.

New carpets are still being offered to the grateful villagers in exchange for old, sometimes naturally dyed ones, two new brass 'diyas' in place of one that was old, and so on. These agents regularly visit most villages, maintain cordial relations with the villagers, and are occasionally even treated as honoured guests by some of them.

Almost all the things being sold to the tourists or the agents are not made any longer in Spiti. Natural dyeing stopped completely a few decades ago. Blacksmiths, copper-smiths, silver-smiths and other such skilled craftsmen are not found any more in Spiti (there never were too many). Trade with Tibet - the traditional source for most of their metalcraft, jewellery, carpets and many other handicrafts - stopped soon after the Chinese occupation. Resumption of trade with Tibet now, although in the offing, is not likely to yield much more than the cheap Chinese and Tibetan goods of the kind that Tibetans already sell in India (although we will have to wait and see).

So this was the situation as I saw it when I landed up in Spiti. Almost before I realised it, I had become involved in trying to stop this sellout. Wherever I went, I discussed this matter with the villagers, the lamas, the religious heads, the pradhans, the tourists, the guides and tour operators accompanying them and, in more than one interesting encounter, with the agents themselves.

In Kaza, I brought the matter to the notice of the top officials in the local administration and urged them to do what they could, which they did, to an extent. The SDM landed up unexpectedly at some of the spots that I had reported to him about, and, with a combination of persuasion and threats of police action, got the process stopped. The ADC brought out a circular and sent it to all the pradhans and gompas, apart from discussing the matter wherever he went on tour.

All this was beginning to have its effects when, through an interesting sequence of events, some Ladagkis* came over on a short tour of Spiti (described later), and added a lot of energy of these efforts. The net result, not only of these, but of some earlier efforts too (by the members of the royal family, for instance), is that the process of direct sale to tourists has more or less stopped in Spiti, and is likely to stay that way if followed up with reasonable effectiveness during the coming months.

The termites - the agents - will prove to be much more difficult to get rid of. They work quietly and below the surface, so that it is difficult to monitor their activities. Their acceptance among the villagers adds to the problem. The process of making the people aware and of eroding the acceptance of these agents is well under way, and might start snowballing soon.

Another hindrance is the confusion in the administration about where it can resort to legal action and where not. Anything that is over a hundred years old is classified as an antique and is protected by the law, but anything that is less old than that is free to be sold. One thing is sure - if attempts are made to draw a line between what can be sold and what can't, the issue is likely to get so confused as to render any intended action ineffective.

Recent attempts by the authorities to register all antiques in Spiti have met with less than moderate cooperation from the villagers. Some fear that registration is a step towards acquisition. Although these fears are clearly unfounded, one can't entirely blame the villagers, considering their experience years ago at the hands of a senior bureaucrat (name withheld) who tried his utmost to buy antiques in the valley, actually bought some, and was finally shooed away by some determined villagers (all hearsay, but more or less common knowledge).

* 'Ladakh', the prevalent spelling, is nowhere near the actual pronunciation. 'Ladak' and 'Ladag' have been used by some, but seem to be ever so slightly off. My humble suggestion, from a position of relative ignorance, is 'Ladagk'. How about it?

The top officials in Spiti will therefore have to use all their ingenuity and their (considerable) influence to launch an energetic drive - token gestures just won't do - to stop this outflow. A drive that is not based solely on the legality or illegality of selling this or that item, but also on the need to preserve the heritage of a people who still have their roots somewhat intact.

I personally am not a conservationist, and have no undue attachment to old things, 'antiques' least of all. But I do believe that a certain continuity should be maintained between the old and the new, and that the new should be at least as beautiful, contextual and rooted in nature as the old that it replaces. Plastic tumblers in place of china-clay or wooden bowls? No! Chemically dyed 'cashmilon' from Ludhiana in place of locally spun, naturally dyed wool? No, again! The tourists, refugees from a rootless culture, still have places like Spiti to come to in order to experience 'rootedness', but if these roots too are chopped, where will the Spitians go as tourists?

THE 'LA DARCHA' FAIR

In the second half of August, a festival called 'La Darcha' took place at Kaza. The origins of this festival lie in a traditional trade-oriented fair that used to be held on a small plateau called 'La Darcha' in the hills near Chicham village. Traders from Tibet, Changthang, Ladagk and Spiti exchanged goods at this annual fair. Since the Tibetans were crucial to the success of this fair, it stopped being held after the Chinese occupation of Tibet.

A few years ago, the administration decided to revive this fair in the form of the major non-religious festival of Spiti. The venue was shifted to Kaza, and the emphasis to cultural performances; the name was retained - the 'La Darcha' fair.

[A detailed critique with recommendations on the running of this festival is being included in a formal paper on tourism-related proposals which will be published soon after this one.]

From the crowds of people at Kaza this summer during the 'La Darcha' fair, it seemed that almost half of Spiti's 10,000 odd population was present. Folk dance troupes from various parts of Himachal Pradesh, Ladagk, and some even from as far off as the north-eastern states, gave cultural performances spread over four

evenings. The Ladagkis were any day the most popular troupe, and gave many performances to a highly appreciative crowd.

Seeing the overwhelming response of the Spitians towards the Ladagki performers confirmed beyond doubt the soundness of an idea (not entirely original) that had been growing in my mind for quite some time - that the Ladagki people, both due to their similarities to the Spitians and their differences, represented a force that could possibly become an effective instrument for bringing about awareness and change in Spiti.

CHANGTHANG

Towards the end of August, I trekked across the Parang la (18,300 ft.) and then along the Pare Chu river to Changthang, a desolate dreamland on Ladagk's border with Tibet. The route that I took is the traditional route taken by the horse-traders of Spiti when they go to sell their famed horses, often through barter, to the people of Changthang and Ladagk.

It took me five extremely lonely days to walk from the last village in Spiti to the first village in Changthang, and during these days I came across neither a single human being nor even a tree. Just an occasional herd of blue sheep, and some garbage left behind by army and ITBP 'expeditions' along the same route.

Changthang is also the home of the Himalayan wild ass ('kiang', in the local language), and I came across many of them on my way to Leh.

A GUST OF WIND FROM LADAGK

On reaching Leh after my Changthang trek, I met some interesting people there - Helena Norberg Hodge, who has been associated with Ladagk for almost two decades now, Mr. Sonam Dawa, the director of the Ladagk Ecological Development Group (LEDeG), Mr. Sonam Wangchuk of SECMOL (Student's Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladagk), Mr. Tashi Rabgias, an eminent Buddhist scholar and poet, and some others.

I told them about Spiti, about what I was doing, and the role the Ladagkis could possibly play. I asked them if some of them could come over to Spiti and exchange

notes with the people there about old problems in Ladagk which were becoming the new problems in Spiti, about how the people of Spiti could benefit from the experience and the mistakes of the Ladagkis, and things like that.

I spent three days in Leh, and somehow things worked out better and faster than I had hoped for. [Interestingly, both LEDeG and SECMOL received copies of my introductory paper on Spiti by post from EQUATIONS just a few hours after my first meeting with each of them! Happy coincidence, and it probably added to the general excitement about Spiti - a land they had initially no more than a vague idea of - among these people.] By the third day, a Ladagki group led by Mr. Tashi Rabgias, and assisted by LEDeG, had taken the decision to tour Spiti, and I rushed off to Spiti to do the groundwork for this visit.

Two weeks later, in mid-September, four brilliant Ladagkis drove down to Spiti - Mr. Tashi Rabgias (on behalf of LEDeG), Mr. Jamyang Gyaltsan and lama Ge Konchok Namgial (both senior lecturers at the Central Institute of Buddhist Studies, Choglamsar), and their irrepressible driver, Mr. Tsering Mutup Tursey. Said Mr. Tashi Rabgias on arrival at Kaza, "Opportunity is like an animal with horns but no tail. If you do not grasp it by the horns as soon as it appears before you, you will be left with nothing to grab when it passes you. So when I heard about Spiti, I grabbed the opportunity to visit it without any hesitation at all!"

We covered the whole valley in a whirlwind and dusty tour lasting a week, holding meetings in key villages and gompas along the way. The visit, to put it very shortly, was quite a success, and we made many plans about future visits, of Ladagkis to Spiti, and of Spitians to Ladagk.

CHANGING NAMES

This was another disturbing and totally unexpected phenomenon that I came across in Spiti. At the time of admission to school, the names of a lot of children had been and were being changed from their original Buddhist names to Hindu names like Amar Singh, Sohan Singh, Sher Singh and Gabbar Singh (Angchuk, Khendap, Kesang and Chhewang their real names), to name just a few of them. I asked a lot of people as to how this came about, and a confused picture began to emerge.

This happened more often earlier than now, when Lahaul and Spiti were still a part of Punjab, and when most of the teachers came from the plains of Punjab. As a result, many grown-up young men and women go around with unlikely sounding Hindu, if not hard-core Punjabi names.

Although in almost all cases the name of the child seemed to have been changed with the verbal consent, or at least a lack of protest, of the parents, most such parents blamed the teachers, who have always been mostly non-local. The standard comment of parents was, "The teacher said he (they're mostly male) couldn't pronounce or spell our child's name, so he gave the child another name on the spot and wrote it down in the register." Amazing!

A slightly different process has been going on in the adjoining valleys of Lahaul and Kinnaur, and it might help to understand the difference. Both these valleys have a mixed population of Hindus and Buddhists; mixed not only from village to village or from person to person, but also in many cases within the same individual, since a large section of the population in these two regions of transition is neither too sure nor very particular about its religion, and in fact is reasonably comfortable with a mixture of both. In many shops in Kinnaur, for instance, I saw the picture of the Dalai lama surrounded by the pictures of Hindu gods and goddesses. These people often change their Buddhist names to Hindu names (never vice versa), often simply to more comfortably mix with the people in the plains and foothills during their frequent trade-related visits there.

This does not, however, hold good for Spiti. Spiti is not a region of transition, nor is the changing of a whole lot of names the result of any hints of a confusion between Buddhism and Hinduism. Consciously or subconsciously, with or without the consent of the affected people, whether anyone is to blame for this or not, is this, by any chance, the dubious process of 'Indianisation' at work?

Once again, since I was there in Spiti, and since I had come across something that I couldn't quite digest, I found myself trying to do something about it. Initially with the help of the visiting Ladagkis. While travelling around Spiti, the Ladagkis discussed this trend (unheard of in Ladagk) with the people. The people everywhere were more or less unanimous about wanting to change back their names, or at least said so. But most felt that if at all it were possible to do so, the process would be too involved.

So, after the Ladagkis left, I approached the ADC with this problem. He took the wind out of the indignation and the arguments that I had built up by saying, "Is that so? In that case, bring me the list of all the people who want to change back their names, and I'll set aside procedure and get all of them changed together." As simple as that.

This meeting took place at the fag end of my summer stay in Spiti, so I couldn't get the people started on the list. Besides, I wanted to be doubly sure that these people actually do want to change back their names, and weren't just saying what we wanted them to say (like they probably did with the teachers in the first place!).

My visit this winter to all parts of the valley has confirmed the fact that the desire to change back names is widespread enough, though perhaps not matched adequately by the willingness to take an initiative in the matter. What I do about this, and whether, will have to emerge naturally from circumstances and from me. Perhaps I won't even need to do anything.

CLEANING KAZA

What was planned as a daylong cleanup of Kaza on Sunday, the 12th of September, extended unexpectedly into four days of intensive cleaning in which at least one representative of each family participated each day. Although they made a relative mess of the cleaning, collecting garbage in tractor trolleys only to dump it by the roadside a little distance away from Kaza (on the first day), or simply making hasty piles, pouring kerosene, and setting them on fire (on subsequent days), it was a beginning nevertheless.

What is more important is that these four days of cleaning culminated in an unprecedented decision - the Vyapar Mandal (shopowners' union) of Kaza declared a ban on the use of polythene bags in shops, with a Rs. 500/- fine for defaulters. Remarkable is the fact that this was a people's decision, and not one that was imposed by the administration.

In addition, a 'Safai' Committee was set up to plan for comprehensive measures to clean Kaza, and to keep it clean.

The ADC, seeing the villagers take such a serious initiative, has agreed to provide generous funds for a long-term garbage strategy for Kaza. Included in this would

be the setting up of public toilets - something that is desperately needed (as was evident during the cleaning) in view of the large floating population at Kaza during the summers.

During my winter visit, I found that the ban on polythene bags had ceased to be operational. It had lasted for about three months, but the tough winter months and the running out of stocks of paper bags had apparently weakened their resolve. This figured in some of my conversations with the shopowners, and they (in particular, the president of the Vyapar Mandal) assured me that the lifting of the ban was only temporary, and as soon as the weather conditions became a little better, by about April, they would reimpose the ban. We decided to work things out in detail during the coming months so that the breakdown of this winter did not repeat next winter. This is something that will need to be repeatedly followed up in order for it to last. And backed up by well thought out administrative measures.

Meanwhile, a valley-wide garbage strategy still seems to be some way off.

ARCHITECTURE

While in Spiti, I have been talking to a lot of people, among them the officials in the local administration, about not discarding local materials and construction techniques in favour of the unsightly, impractical and uneconomical concrete and corrugated GI sheets that are increasingly showing up; about modifying and improving traditional and government architecture to make it more energy-efficient by using common-sense and solar energy; about using improved techniques of construction in local materials (like mud) in order to more effectively tackle new problems like increased rainfall and to reduce the consumption of wood in building.

The response has indeed been quite good, from the people and, refreshingly, from the administration. I am presently involved in the design and construction of three solar-passive mud buildings in Spiti. Two of these are government buildings, while the third is a 'sarai' for the gompa at Tabo (the gompa is itself an ancient mud building reaching its 1000th year in 1996).

The local administration, notably its top official, the ADC, is looking towards these buildings as test-cases for a dramatically altered approach towards govern-

ment architecture in Spiti. The local people, too, are likely to be positively influenced by the example set by these buildings, and many are already showing keen interest in these developments, particularly in the use of solar energy for space heating.

I intend to make full use of my presence and involvement in Spiti to help preserve the richness and the visual, material and social harmony with nature that is characteristic about the architecture of Spiti. In addition, since nowhere should architectural practices stagnate or close up to outside influences, I would like to see how the architecture of Spiti can take a few modest steps in evolution in terms of better and more informed use of local materials, reduced use of wood, and the use of designs that enhance energy-efficiency and reduce fuel consumption.

Starting this summer, I intend to also look at the emerging towns of Kaza and Tabo and work on detailed proposals for their harmonious and wholesome growth. And on sensible limits to that growth.

Another interesting assignment has meanwhile come my way. I am guest-editing a special issue of the bi-monthly journal 'ARCHITECTURE + DESIGN' on the theme, 'High-Himalayan Vernacular: Breaking Down Under Stress?' which will focus on the problems and stresses that are being experienced by the architectural fabric of human settlements in the higher reaches of the Himalayas under the powerful and monocultural influence of 'modernity', with a strong emphasis on an energetic search for meaningful solutions. This issue has been slated for November-December, 1994. 'High-Himalayan' regions from Afghanistan to Bhutan are being looked at in this issue, with a detailed report on Spiti being prepared by me.

NATURAL DYEING

Natural dyeing died an unnatural death in Spiti at least a few decades ago. At first, it did not occur to me that it might be possible to revive this process after such a long gap. But slowly, while travelling around Spiti, seeing handicrafts being made and being used, and seeing the desperation of the tourists for anything that had 'dyed' naturally, I began to grudgingly believe in the possibility of life after death. In a nutshell, then, and sparing you any more puns, I am now fully involved in trying to revive natural dyeing in Spiti.

My getting interested in natural dyeing, like in most other things in Spiti, just happened, and I am letting it continue to happen. I am no expert in this field; in fact, I hardly knew anything about natural dyeing when I started, and the learning process has just begun. This is how it is with many of the things I do, and I regard it as an asset.

This winter, I began a search for any information on natural dyeing that I could get hold of among the people of Spiti. There were very few who knew anything at all. Some even dug out generation old chemically dyed shawls which they presumed must have been naturally dyed because of their age.

But then there were the few who knew some things, and I slowly began to piece together very sketchy (often maddeningly contradictory) information on traditional methods of dyeing, on the traditional set of colours and their correct shades, on plants that used to be used and plants that weren't used earlier but could possibly be used because of the colour of their flowers and the large quantity in which they grew in parts of Spiti.

A key part of the process would be to get the people interested, motivated, even excited about the possibility of taking up natural dyeing once again. This has been begun, and there is already a scattering of people all over Spiti who are not only excited, but raring to go. The ball, it seems, is in my court.

This summer, I will be collecting samples of plants from Spiti and from some adjoining parts of Kinnaur and Lahaul and getting them checked out for their dying potential. The process of ascertaining the cultivability of these plants has simultaneously been begun, with some experimenting scheduled for the summers (along with some of the more interested and knowledgeable people in Spiti). This might well be crucial, for if natural dyeing really gets going in Spiti, as I hope it will, these plants will all be in trouble.

And while all this long-term work is on, why wait? I plan to try and get some of the people to get their home-spun wool dyed in natural colours at establishments outside Spiti, so that the first naturally dyed shawls and carpets in decades are hopefully on display during the next 'La Darcha' fair in August this year. This is ambitious, but very, very possible.

TOURISM

My interaction on tourism has, over the months, covered all sections of the people in Spiti - the villagers, the pradhans, guest-house and restaurant owners, taxi owners, budding travel agents, the members of the royal family, religious heads, youths and youth groups, women and women's groups, the tourists themselves and, significantly, the top officials of the local administration.

The present ADC at Kaza, Mr. Manoj Kumar Srivastava, an IAS officer, took over around the time that I reached Spiti last year, and I have had the opportunity to meet him a number of times during my stays at Kaza. Many of these meetings concentrated on tourism, during which we had detailed discussions on all aspects of tourism in the valley.

What emerged was a broad consensus on all the major aspects of this issue, and we resolved to make Spiti a model of sensibly planned and sustainable tourism for other Himalayan regions to learn from and follow. In the capacity of an independent researcher, I am now preparing a detailed report containing concrete tourism-related proposals for the ADC to follow up on. The first of these proposals will hopefully begin to be implemented during the coming tourist season.

The proposed report is intended to be the first in a short series of periodically updated reports (perhaps one every spring over the next year or two) on an evolving tourism strategy for Spiti. After the first few years, which represent a period of transition, the tourism situation is likely to stabilise somewhat, but the process of further evolution and fine-tuning must continue.

I am also trying to get the guest-house owners together in the form of an association or a cooperative which lays down guidelines for their own operation while at the same time working to preserve their collective interests by actively participating in the formulation and the implementation of the tourism strategy in Spiti. After a few initial misgivings and false starts since last summer, this cooperative is likely to take off during the coming summers.

I am working on two sets of complementary guidelines for the setting up and functioning of guest houses in Spiti. The first set will suggest self-imposed guidelines which the proposed cooperative could incorporate in its functioning,

while the second set will suggest guidelines that the administration should impose on the guest houses.

If the cooperative starts functioning in an enlightened and responsible manner, keeping in mind both short-term and long-term self-interest, and making sure that its self-interest does not clash with the well-being of the social, cultural, economic and physical environment of which it is a part, administrative controls would become superfluous (as they should always be).

Similar moves are on to get together local travels agents (too few of them so far), restaurant owners and taxi owners in Spiti.

Begging, specially by children, which I predict will make its first appearance in Spiti during the coming tourist season, will have to be tackled immediately, decisively and once and for all by the community, so that there is not a scratch on its self-respect and pride.

In September last year, the Financial Commissioner-cum-Secretary (Tribal Development) to the Govt. of Himachal Pradesh, Mr. A.N. Vidyarthi, came on tour to Spiti. At Kaza, some of the guest-house and restaurant owners met him and complained about the fact that the highly self-sufficient 'package tours' to Spiti, organised invariably by non-local tour operators, did not benefit the local entrepreneurs in any way, and should not be allowed in Spiti. Mr. Vidyarthi agreed with them and assured them that from the summer of '94, these package tours would be stopped. I wonder, did he mean what he said?

In the first half of April, I will be going to Shimla in order to meet some of the officials and legislators who are involved in making policy-level decisions about Spiti. Tourism will be one of the major topics of conversation during these meetings.

LADAGK ONCE AGAIN

Some of us are meeting at Leh (thanks to EQUATIONS) towards the end of April to see how the Ladagk-Spiti relationship, which began so well last summer, can evolve further. There is a certain naturalness in the affinity that the people of these two regions feel for each other which can be very enriching for both. if cultivated with care and sensitivity.

THE MAGIC OF 'NO METHOD'

The mood during my visits to Spiti was quite relaxed, and very little of what happened was contrived or pre-planned. The things that did happen, happened quite naturally and spontaneously, so that in many cases it was difficult to pinpoint when and how this or that began. The results, the almost incidental by-products of 'being there', varied from the encouraging to the, well, magical.

Of course, there were disappointments, too; of course, there is a long way to go - both inwardly and outwardly; of course, phenomena like tourism (and war, for that matter) seem as inevitable as they are absurd. But, in the method of no method, the disappointments are as few as the expectations, the pleasure and the enrichment never desert you, and, what is more, there is scope for magic...

... SO WATCH OUT, FOR THERE IS MAGIC IN THE AIR!



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NOTES

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Shubhendu, a friend of Equations, is an independent researcher.

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(K.T. Suresh)
Co-ordinator
EQUATIONS

Equitable Tourism Options (EQUATIONS) seeks to situate the tourism critique within the overall development debate. Our activities include documentation, publication, research and supporting individuals and groups involved in concerted action on tourism concerns.